

ISAIAH: CHAPTERS 4 AND 5

THINGS WILL GET WORSE BEFORE THEY GET BETTER

What happens when you decide to really clean and organize your house? You have to tear things apart, pull them out, and go thorough them. So in the process it looks like a bigger mess than when you started. Or if you are going to paint the outside of your house what happens? You have to scrape off the old loose paint and sand it away, revealing the rotten spots of wood. To the onlooker, the house looks worse than before your started. Then you have to patch those rotten spots and only after all that is done can the fresh coat of beautiful paint be applied. Things do get worse before they get better. We see that principle in the Scripture we look at today. So let's turn to Isaiah chapter 4 and read.

Isaiah 4:1-6 (NLT):

1 In that day few men will be left alive. Seven women will fight over each of them and say, "Let us all marry you! We will provide our own food and clothing. Only let us be called by your name so we won't be mocked as old maids."

*2 But **in the future**, Israel—the **branch of the Lord**—will be lush and beautiful, and the fruit of the land will be the pride of its people.*

*3 All those whose names are written down, who have survived the destruction of Jerusalem, **will be a holy people.***

*4 The Lord **will wash the moral filth** from the women of Jerusalem. **He will cleanse Jerusalem of its bloodstains** by a spirit of judgment that burns like fire.*

5 Then the Lord will provide shade for Jerusalem and all who assemble there. There will be a canopy of smoke and cloud throughout the day and clouds of fire at night, covering the glorious land.

*6 **It will be a shelter** from daytime heat and a hiding place from storms and rain.*

Verse 1 should be pretty well self-explanatory. These women who were described in chapter 3 will do almost anything to get a man who will provide for them, including sharing him with several other women. But then we see a swift and dramatic change in Isaiah 4:2 NRSV:

2 On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.

This fourth chapter predicts conditions not only in the days following the Babylonian captivity (circa 536 BC), but also in the days following the Great Tribulation yet in the future when Jesus returns.

The previous judgment prophecies from Isaiah 2:6-4:1 are now balanced by the supreme hope that centers on Jerusalem. No matter what happens there will be a new city that will arise on Mount Zion, one that is purified and protected by God. What was tragedy will become hope. When all the trials and disasters are over, God will create a new world for us to live in. A world without suffering and pain. “*The branch of the Lord,*” is most likely a reference to the Messiah, Jesus, who is described as a “*branch*” in Jeremiah 23:5 and 33:15. Isaiah 11:1 contains similar language.

Isaiah 4:3,4:

*3 Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem,
4 once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.*

“*The filth of the daughters of Zion,*” refers more to the corruption of the city as a whole than to the women in particular. “*Bloodstains of Jerusalem*” refers to the sins of God’s people as a whole. “*A spirit of judgment and a spirit of burning*” point unmistakably to the Judgment Day. During the darkest of times deliverance will come through the “*Branch of the Lord,*” Jesus Christ. Those left in Zion and remaining in Jerusalem will be the special objects of Jesus’ favor and will be set apart to the Lord who will wash away their filth in His own blood and cleanse their hearts with the spirit of burning.

Isaiah 4:5, 6

*5 Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy.
6 It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.*

This entire process points to a new creation. The “*cloud by day and fire by night*” is a reference to the Exodus and how God led His people through the wilderness for 40 years. He visibly demonstrated His presence to them by using a cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night to lead them where He wanted them to go. So the Israelites would immediately understand the meaning of this image that Isaiah uses, and realize that Israel would once again be under the care of the Lord God Jehovah. The presence of God will once again be gloriously apparent in their midst

The glory of God will be a canopy, a pavilion. In other words, God’s presence will provide protection and refuge for His people. We see that to some degree even today for people who remain close to God. He does give them protection and refuge during their sufferings. But the bigger picture applies to the Millennium when there will be security in the New Jerusalem. It will be forgiven and under the protection of Jesus Christ from all perils and danger. A perfect climax to this glorious prophecy of salvation.

ISAIAH CHAPTER 5

1 Now I will sing a song for the one I love about his vineyard: My beloved has a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill.

2 He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with choice vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks. Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes, but the grapes that grew were wild and sour.

3 “Now, you people of Jerusalem and Judah, you have heard the case; you be the judges.

4 What more could I have done to cultivate a rich harvest? Why did my vineyard give me wild grapes when I expected sweet ones?

5 Now this is what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will tear down its fences and let it be destroyed. I will break down its walls and let the animals trample it.

6 I will make it a wild place. I will not prune the vines or hoe the ground. I will let it be overgrown with briars and thorns. I will command the clouds to drop no more rain on it.”

7 This is the story of the Lord’s people. They are the vineyard of the Lord Almighty. Israel and Judah are his pleasant garden. He expected them to yield a crop of justice, but instead he found bloodshed. He expected to find righteousness, but instead he heard cries of oppression.

8 Destruction is certain for you who buy up property so others have no place to live. Your homes are built on great estates so you can be alone in the land.

9 But the Lord Almighty has sealed your awful fate. With my own ears I heard him say, “Many beautiful homes will stand deserted, the owners dead or gone.

10 Ten acres of vineyard will not produce even six gallons of wine. Ten measures of seed will yield only one measure of grain.”

11 Destruction is certain for you who get up early to begin long drinking bouts that last late into the night.

12 You furnish lovely music and wine at your grand parties; the harps, lyres, tambourines, and flutes are superb! **BUT YOU NEVER THINK ABOUT THE LORD OR NOTICE WHAT HE IS DOING.**

13 So I will send my people into exile far away because they do not know me. The great and honored among them will starve, and the common people will die of thirst.

14 The grave is licking its chops in anticipation of Jerusalem, this delicious morsel. Her great and lowly will be swallowed up, with all her drunken crowds.

15 In that day the arrogant will be brought down to the dust; the proud will be humbled.

16 But the Lord Almighty is exalted by his justice. The holiness of God is displayed by his righteousness.

17 In those days flocks will feed among the ruins; lambs and kids will pasture there.

18 Destruction is certain for those who drag their sins behind them, tied with cords of falsehood.

19 They even mock the Holy One of Israel and say, "Hurry up and do something! Quick, show us what you can do. We want to see what you have planned."

20 Destruction is certain for those who say that evil is good and good is evil; that dark is light and light is dark; that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter.

21 DESTRUCTION is certain for those who think they are wise and consider themselves to be clever.

22 DESTRUCTION is certain for those who are heroes when it comes to drinking, who boast about all the liquor they can hold.

23 They take bribes to pervert justice. They let the wicked go free while punishing the innocent.

24 Therefore, they will all disappear like burning straw. Their roots will rot and their flowers wither, for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty. They have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

25 That is why the anger of the Lord burns against his people. That is why he has raised his fist to crush them. The hills tremble, and the rotting bodies of his people are thrown as garbage into the streets. But **EVEN THEN THE LORD'S ANGER WILL NOT BE SATISFIED.** His fist is still poised to strike!

26 He will send a signal to the nations far away. He will whistle to those at the ends of the earth, and they will come racing toward Jerusalem.

27 They will not get tired or stumble. They will run without stopping for rest or sleep. Not a belt will be loose, not a sandal thong broken.

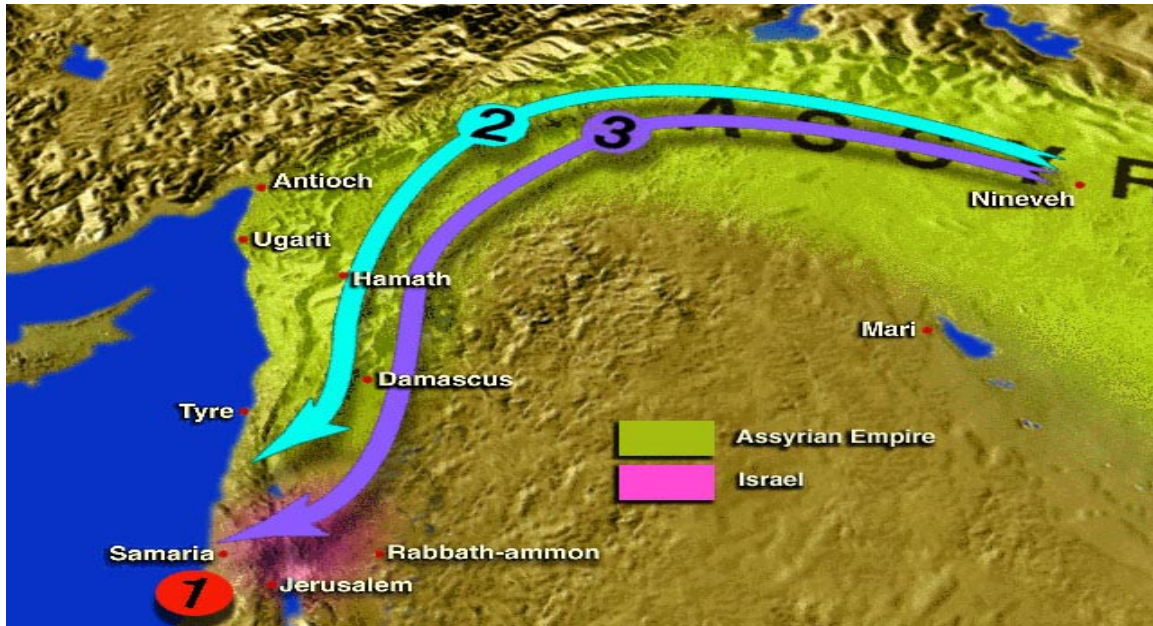
28 Their arrows will be sharp and their bows ready for battle. Sparks will fly from their horses' hooves as the wheels of their chariots spin like the wind.

29 Roaring like lions, they will pounce on their prey. They will seize my people and carry them off into captivity, and no one will be there to rescue them.

30 The enemy nations will growl over their victims like the roaring of the sea. A cloud of darkness and sorrow will hover over Israel. The clouds will blot out the light.

Chapter five starts with the song in verses 1-6, asks a serious question in verse 4 indicating a serious dilemma, and then in verses 8-30 it delivers a lengthy series of "woes." This whole chapter consists of warnings of judgment. It makes clear that the divine judgment will come in the form of Assyrian invasions that will devastate Israel

and Judah in the latter decades of the eighth century BC.



Map of Assyrian Invasion Route (circa 722 BC)

The song in verses 1-7 is a parable and an allegory. Isaiah is the singer. God is the beloved farmer. The farmer planted a vineyard (established the nation of Israel) and tenderly cared for it. He selected the finest seed. He prepared the soil. He protected the plants from intruders by building a tower in the middle of it. That means God was always available, right in the middle of His people and watching out for them. So after all that work and effort God expected a crop of the finest fruit, but instead there were only worthless berries. God had chosen Israel, led it to a land *“flowing with milk and honey,”* given them His Word in the form of the Ten Commandments, additional guidelines, and prophecies and promises. He set His dwelling place in the midst of them. He tended them with loving care and protection. But what was the outcome? Did the people become good fruit, loving God with all their hearts, obeying Him, and serving Him with joy? No, they had become worthless and woeful berries. In other words, they were disobedient to God, ignored His instructions, and became evil. The only fruit they produced was bad fruit that grieved God’s heart and dishonored His holy Name. The rest of the chapter specifies exactly how they had done this.

In this parable God addresses Himself directly to the people of Jerusalem and Judah asking what more He could have done to provide the very best of conditions for them. After all the care God had provided Israel along with His gracious forgiveness, extended time and time again when they failed, how could it be possible that they would not become what He had desired for them to become? Why had they become so worthless and useless? The only answer was that they rejected the true living God that provided so generously for them and went their own way. That is the same kind of attitude that twenty-first century Christians have embraced. They’ve turned away as well from the one

true living God

So after giving them one opportunity after another to repent and turn from their evil ways, God decided to give them up and lay waste the land and not allow any rain to fall upon it.

Remember, in Scripture, that word plays, allegories (a literary form that tells a story to present a truth or enforce a moral¹), love songs, parables, and similar literary techniques are the stock-in-trade of the prophets, and remind us that we are experiencing literary craftsmanship of the highest quality. The prophets were trained in the art of getting the message across in such a way as to make it clear, convincing, arresting, and memorable.² Certainly this song/parable is one of the finest illustrations of this.

In verses 8-23 we find six “woes.” A “woe” is something that brings great anguish, affliction, and misery. We will see many woes as we proceed through Isaiah, and there are many throughout the prophetic books. Christ pronounced woe on the Pharisees eight times in Matthew 23. The other place where a large number of woes is pronounced is in the Book of Revelation.

Isaiah 5:8-10, NAS:

8 *Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, until there is no more room, so that you have to live alone in the midst of the land!*

9 *In my ears the LORD of hosts has sworn, "Surely, many houses shall become desolate, even great and fine ones, without occupants.*

10 *"For ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine [5 gallons], and a homer of seed will yield but an ephah [one bushel] of grain."*

A judgment is pronounced here on those who selfishly seek to accumulate real estate for themselves by taking advantage of the poor and helpless. This is especially significant in light of God’s laws regarding the family homestead. You remember that the land of Israel was called the Promised Land. God had promised it not only to the nation, but He also promised certain sections to tribes, that is to families. This inheritance was forever and it was to be cherished. If it was ever sold, after a period of time it was still to revert back to the original owner (Numbers 36:7; 33:54). It was particularly reprehensible for someone to take advantage of a poor person just to get their land away from them, and even worse if they never returned it to the original owner. So here In Isaiah 5 we find that the rich had been doing exactly that. God is now telling them that their real estate holdings will be destroyed and their lands will not bear crops. In other words they will lose everything. People who have made themselves rich by swindling others out of their inheritance will lose everything they have. We might describe it today in terms of famine conditions or bankruptcy.

¹ Merriam-Webster, I. 1996, ©1988. Merriam-Webster's collegiate thesaurus. Previously published as: Webster's collegiate thesaurus. Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Mass.

² Sawyer, John F. A. *Isaiah*. Philadelphia (Westminster Press), 1984.

The second “*woe*” describes the crimes of the accused in verses 11 and 12, and the judgment that awaits them in verses 13-17:

Isaiah 5:11-17, NAS

11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink; who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them!

12 And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine; but they do not pay attention to the deeds of the LORD, nor do they consider the work of His hands.

13 Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude is parched with thirst.

14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; and Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry, and the jubilant within her, descend into it.

15 So the common man will be humbled, and the man of importance abased, the eyes of the proud also will be abased.

16 But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show himself holy in righteousness.

17 Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, and strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy.

Apparently alcoholism was running rampant among the rich and powerful of the land. Instead of wine being used innocently to gladden the hearts of the people or as a source of income that would improve the standard of living in Jerusalem, it was ruining the country. For the prophets, drunkenness came to be associated with the affluent aristocracy, a symbol of decadence and the misuse of public funds. This is yet another assault on the corruption of Judah's leaders. They do not seem to understand that by misusing the fruit of the land and oppressing the poor, they are insulting their Creator and will have to pay the penalty (Proverbs 17:5). They were ignoring the warnings against drunkenness that God had given them (Leviticus 10:9; 1 Samuel 1:14; Proverbs 20:1; 31:4). *Sheol* is just another way of describing *hell*. The people will be thrown out of their land and deprived of its rich produce. In place of feasting and drunkenness there will be starvation and death. In place of proud affluence and prosperity, there will be degradation and ruin. It is entirely possible that God finally brought judgment on the city of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast because of similar lifestyles.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the devastation of the promised land by the Assyrians is not considered to be a defeat for the God of Israel, but on the contrary as a mighty act of divine intervention, in which the justice and holiness of God are displayed for all to see. “*The Lord of hosts*” is the creator of Heaven and earth and **JUSTICE** is what He demands of His people; a just society and a just world.

But again we see in verses 16 and 17 that God wins. The Lord will be exalted. When

Judah has been cleared of corruption and oppression, the land will once again be filled with justice and holiness, and God's people will live in security like lambs grazing in a pasture. Here is a picture of restored peace and justice where the underprivileged and vulnerable members of society are freed from oppression and live, for the first time, as in their own land.

Isaiah 5:18, 19, NAS:

18 *Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, and sin as if with cart ropes;*

19 *Who say, "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know it!"*

"Cords of falsehood" means "deceptively thin cords," like a spider's web, and refers to the first stage in a progression that I'm sure most of us can relate to. A person who knows what they're thinking is wrong tells themselves that they'll just do the thing once, and that's how it starts. Soon the person cannot stop themselves and the slender thread that originally tempted them has become a "cart rope" (thick and strong) binding them as a prisoner to a wicked habit or habits and their consequences.

Verse 19 recognizes that the "work" and "the plan of the Holy One of Israel" are speeding toward fulfillment, but the people referred to in this verse do not believe it. What Isaiah means here is "Woe to those who continue to doubt God's Word." **They are mocking** God and challenging Him to act. They were simply asking for trouble. They were not unlike a great majority of the people today in the United States.

Isaiah 5:20:

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

This is the fourth "Woe" saying in this chapter. It speaks to the injustice in society where the wicked prosper at the expense of the innocent, and where the legal processes are used to smother victims of dishonesty instead of helping them. Dishonesty and deceit bring prosperity and contentment to the ruling class but despair and suffering to everyone else.

Isaiah 5:21, NAS

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight!

People who are wise in their own eyes are often people who are their own gods. We have a lot of that today: individuals who consider themselves to be the last word, who believe that God exists only if it makes sense to them. These are those who carve out a god of their own liking. A god whom they only want to see as benevolent, not as One who judges in any way. But what these people don't recognize is that a god who is only benevolent must of necessity also be incapable of dealing with the sin and evil in the world+. Therefore they only have half a god.

The fifth “Woe” attacks those who see themselves to be wise. Whereas true “wisdom” is demonstrated by those who fear God and keep His commandments as we read in Psalm 111:10:

10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Another Psalm that closely relates to Psalm 111:10 is Psalm 127:1(NLT):

1 Unless the Lord builds a house, the work of the builders is useless. Unless the Lord protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good.

Isaiah 5:22-23, NAS

22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink;

23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!

Drunkenness and alcoholism must have been a major problem because this is the second denunciation of it. In this Israeli culture the upper class were constantly drinking. This reminds us of our own society where drinking is celebrated and associated with every occasion. Those of us who don’t drink, especially if it is because we believe God does not want us to, are mocked and considered unsophisticated. Yet here in Isaiah we find judges who think of little else other than “cocktail time.” In situations where real strength of character is needed, where they should refuse bribes and defend human rights, they fail miserably.

Isaiah 5:24:

24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

“Therefore” because of the behaviors described in the six woes there will be consequences and now Isaiah outlines them. **The punishment for such behavior will be severe.** Because they have cast aside and despised the Word of God, their whole way of life would be destroyed by foreign invaders and they would lose everything that they had valued over God. That is the real issue. Now how does a person “despise” God’s Word? By ignoring it, by devaluing it, by refusing to live according to it.

Isaiah 5:25:

25 Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

So because people have despised His Word in those ways, God has become angry. He allows an army to attack them. Verse 25 simply continues where verse 24 left off. This verse describes the results of an overwhelming defeat by an invading enemy. Further, it warns the people of Judah that the same fate that has come upon the northern kingdom of Israel awaits them also if they do not repent.

Verses 26-30 describe the approach of an enemy army (also see Isaiah 7:18-25 and 10:27-32; Habakkuk 1:5-11). These verses are an introduction to what we will see unfold in the next three-and-a-half chapters. All that we can be absolutely certain of in these prophetic verses is that the Lord is going to either use the armies of the world's great powers, or appear Himself in some miraculous apocalyptic event, to intervene in Israel's history. It will be a confrontation between God and Israel.

Isaiah 5:26:

26 He will raise a signal for a nation far away, and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth; Here they come, swiftly, speedily!

The invasion starts with a signal from God. Military leaders throughout the world responded to His will whenever God wanted to use them. Whatever happens, throughout all creation throughout time is under God's control. "Raising a signal" suggests some kind of flag. The Hebrew word used here actually means "a pole raised for all to see." (Numbers 21:8). "Nation far away" could well mean the many nations that joined forces under the Assyrian flag. "Whistling" compares God's authority over these armies to a man's effortless control in calling his dog.

Isaiah 5:27,28:

*27 None of them is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a loincloth is loose, not a sandal-thong broken;
28 their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind.*

These verses describe the army under God's command as being strong, disciplined, and efficient. We're not just reading military history here. **WE'RE SEEING THE RESULTS OF A DIVINE INTERVENTION FROM THE HEAVENLY REALM INTO THE NATURAL REALM.**

Isaiah 5:29,30:

*29 Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar; they growl and seize their prey, they carry it off, and no one can rescue.
30 They will roar over it on that day, like the roaring of the sea. And if one look to the land— only darkness and distress; and the light grows dark with clouds.*

Three images conclude this picture of impending doom: The roaring of lions, the thunder of waves, and a darkened sky. I believe the "roaring is like a lion" is a reference to God as we find in Amos 1:2:

The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

Whether God chooses to use an invading army, a storm at sea, or a tsunami, it is God who is confronting the wicked.

“*Light grows dark with clouds*” may be equated to what happens during a major military battle where the black smoke from fires in a burning city would darken the sky. Not a pretty picture. But we want you to keep in mind throughout our study the righteousness, the sovereignty, the majesty, the power, and yes, the love of the Lord God Jehovah, the Creator and Redeemer.

The book of Isaiah is going to reveal to us a complete picture of God. Some of the most powerful statements of God’s sovereignty and majesty are found in chapters 40-45. When we get to chapter 53 we will see a picture of God our Savior. His nurture and love for us are expressed in many places throughout the book. The key to true inner peace is found in chapter 26. Throughout the book God calls us to turn to Him, to receive His comfort and salvation. Yet, because God has such love for us, such righteousness, and great sovereignty, He must deal with the sin and evil in the world. So we also see this side of God. Here in these early chapters, we are learning about the God who will one day free His people from the effects of injustice, crime, lawlessness, and immorality.

What kind of God would He be if He were only a God of love and benevolence who never delivered His people from all that is wrong in the world? Who never set things right? Praise God that He loves us enough to judge the sin that oppresses us!